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Vandelanotte, Lieven

Published in:

Constructions and Frames

DOI:

[10.1075/cf.00050.van](https://doi.org/10.1075/cf.00050.van)

Publication date:

2021

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (HARVARD):

Vandelanotte, L 2021, 'Creative constructs, constructions, and frames in Internet discourse', *Constructions and Frames*, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 160-191. <https://doi.org/10.1075/cf.00050.van>

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Creative constructs, constructions, and frames in Internet discourse

Lieven Vandelanotte

University of Namur (NALT institute) & KU Leuven (FunC research group)

Abstract

This paper explores questions of constructionality and framing in Internet discourse. It proposes a sharper understanding of what, as analysts, we mean by Internet memes, before turning to formal and semantic aspects of Internet memes as multimodal (image-text) constructions. A broad range of examples is considered, but the focus is mainly on image macro memes and labelling memes. Particular attention is focused on the presentational templates that mark out particular meme constructions, and grounds for distinctions between creative constructs and entrenched, conventionalized constructions are offered. The role of frames in the meaning-making mechanisms of memes is investigated, and also explored for a type of Twitter discourse not usually considered alongside established Internet memes.

Keywords

constructions, frames, Internet memes, multimodality, Twitter

1. Internet memes, memes on the Internet

In Internet discourse, old and new communicative patterns combine creatively, mixing text and images of various kinds, in ways that are partly predictable and partly innovative. Recent work in Construction Grammar has taken a particular interest in Internet memes (e.g. Danygier & Vandelanotte 2017, Zenner & Geeraerts 2018, Bülow et al. 2018), which this paper also turns to as one of its main descriptive foci, alongside Twitter discourse. In this paper, I set out to re-examine two main theoretical questions: (i) how do we distinguish potentially very local and ephemeral online discourse constructs from constructions, and (ii) what roles do frames, of which different types, play in the meaning-making process of these constructs? In this introduction, I first want to clarify how Internet memes, more narrowly defined, differ from broader notions of what memes are.

The notion of memes long predates social media discourse, and goes back to the work of Richard Dawkins (1976), in which memes were proposed as a cultural counterpart to genes. Indeed, memes were seen as cultural replicators, leaping from brain to brain in a process of imitation; examples could include such many and varied cultural practices as tunes, catchphrases, clothing styles, celebrations (birthdays, name days), and the like. In its currently widespread application to a particular genre of Internet communication (cf. Wiggins & Bowers 2015), memes in fact no longer just replicate to survive, without human agency; instead, the creative intervention of human “brains” is essential. Dawkins recognized this himself in referring to Internet memes as a “hijacking of the original idea” in which “mutations are designed – not random – with the full knowledge of the person doing the mutating.” (2013 qtd in Wiggins & Bowers 2015: 1891).

The ingredient of creative human agency is central to current understandings of Internet memes. For instance, Shifman (2014: 41) defines a meme as “a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of form, and/or stance, which were created with awareness of each other, and were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users.” The approach focused on defining Internet memes as a genre, proposed in Wiggins & Bowers (2015), complements this with a

three-step process, where initially some media must exist which is ‘spreadable’ (i.e. it can be shared online), which subsequently becomes an emergent meme when altered versions begin to appear, leading to a fully established meme when more remixes and imitations come to be rapidly spread online.

The twin properties of creative participation (rather than mere sharing) within online ‘speech communities’, and of memes constituting groups of items (rather than one-off ‘jokes’ circulated online), set the scholarly notion of an Internet meme apart from some popular uses of the term. Indeed, a joke or ironic comment shared via social media is not automatically an Internet meme. A second potential confusion may be more intractable, and concerns the distinction between Internet memes and ‘memes on the Internet’, i.e. memes in the original sense rooted in the work of Dawkins, which can also circulate online. An example may serve to illustrate the potential ambiguity, but also the interesting interactions between the two, and ways in which a principled distinction can be drawn.

Political campaign buses are by no means a new feature, but they have taken on special significance in the context of the UK’s departure from the EU. The red campaign bus used by Vote Leave in the 2016 EU Referendum campaign, featuring the text “We send the EU £350 million a week / let’s fund our NHS [National Health Service] instead / Vote Leave / Take back control”, has become iconic. The financial claim contained within this message has long since been established as wrong even on its own terms, but the message, and its carrier, have become fixtures in the Brexit landscape, returned to in different guises to the present day. Buses being used to spread messages about Brexit in this way have become memetic in the broader, original sense. For instance, pro-EU campaign buses appeared with opposing messages (“Brexit to cost £2,000 million a week says Government’s own report. Is it worth it?”), and phrases referring to lies on buses have become common occurrences in discourses around Brexit: “put that on the side of a bus” is often used (on Twitter, for instance) following facts cited to debunk the supposed merits of Brexit, and “you’ll need a bigger bus” to comment on further perceived untruths.

A photoshopped example such as Figure 1 is arguably already somewhat closer to the narrower, “Internet”, sense of a meme: the bus is blue (the colour of the Conservative Party) and leading Brexiteers Boris Johnson and Jacob Rees-Mogg were edited into the image, along with text suggesting Brexit means handing over power over the National Health Service to US corporations. To the extent that this is a fairly elaborate, one-off creative mock-up, however, rather than part of a specific series of creative iterations, it probably doesn’t break through the stage of an emergent meme, in the sense of Bowers & Wiggins (2015). Examples such as those in Figures 2-3 do reach the stage of an Internet meme in the stricter sense, even if they are relatively short-lived and occurred in a very restricted online discourse setting only. Both (like Figure 1) were posted in response to a Conservative Party advertisement on their Twitter page (in November 2019) announcing the unveiling of their December 2019 General Election campaign bus. Figure 2 is still fairly elaborate, but not a one-off, and it lists multiple examples of the Conservative Party’s perceived bad record in government, riffing on the idea of a “bigger bus” being needed. Several responses like Figure 3 went back to the original red Vote Leave bus, but changed the text on the bus, thanks to Brexit Bus meme generators on various websites, including imgflip.com and memegenerator.net (where they are still found at the time of writing). The text criticizes Brexiteers’ behaviour, in this case money spent by Boris Johnson on a girlfriend’s business project.



Figure 1. Mock-up of a Conservative Party campaign bus.



Figure 2. “A bigger bus” meme.



Figure 3. Brexit Bus meme.

These examples reveal an interesting trade-off between the definitional requirement, in order to speak of an Internet meme, for there to be creative alterations to spreadable media, and on the other hand the easy reproducibility of such alterations, where the most productive memes can easily be modified (through meme generators) and the types of alterations are quite uniform and often technically quite ‘imperfect’ or ‘visible’. Simplicity and imperfection have been shown in a study of viral YouTube videos (Shifman 2012: 194) to boost the popularity of online artefacts as compared against technically perfect, professionally produced artefacts. This may help explain why of Figures 1-3, Figure 3 has the most ‘memetic’ potential.

Another point we can glean from the above discussion is that merely using phrases does not constitute an Internet meme in the narrow, “hijacked” sense: a phrase like “put that on the side of a bus” or “you’ll need a bigger bus” could just as well be used in a spoken interaction (for instance with a disgruntled voter challenging a politician at a hustings). Typically an image-text combination is involved, and we will return to this in the next section. This aspect may be implied in Shifman’s (2014) definition, though it seems not very clearly stated. Alternatively, as we will see in Section 5,

some specific pattern of presentation, only used in combination in an online setting, may characterize a meme, even if it only consists of text. This kind of reasoning ('take it offline and see if it can still function naturally in face to face interaction') can be used as a rule of thumb in case of doubt, to distinguish a "meme on the Internet" from an "Internet meme".

Internet memes form the main descriptive focus of most of this paper, but the question of constructional status and reliance on a particular kind of frame will also be applied to a pervasive pattern found in Twitter discourse in Section 5. First, Section 2 considers a number of arguments in favour of a constructional approach to Internet memes of different kinds, and Section 3 considers the roles cognitive frames, in the sense of Fillmore (1982), play in this. Section 4 then zooms in on one subgenre of Internet memes, that of labelling memes (in which textual 'labels' guide our figurative interpretation of a depicted scene), with particular focus on the very popular example of the Distracted Boyfriend meme,¹ a prime example of the dynamic between creativity and regularity that characterizes a successful meme. The extent to which 'constructions' can also be invoked in the case of the very frequent use of a particular conversation frame in Twitter discourse is considered in Section 5, and Section 6 rounds off the paper with a brief conclusion.

2. Multimodal constructions in online discourse

That some types of Internet memes can be considered as constructions which combine textual and visual elements in regularly patterned ways has been argued in recent Construction Grammar inspired approaches (e.g. Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017, Zenner & Geeraerts 2018, Bülow et al. 2018). The arguments for each meme subgenre can be different, but overall the evidence seems clear that well-established image-text memes are constructions.²

A prime example is that of the so-called image macro meme, characterized by an image with two lines of text, one at the top of the image and the other at the bottom, most typically even using a particular font ("Impact", cf. Brideau & Berret 2014). As Zenner & Geeraerts (2018: 177-178) have argued, the name of the particular meme series is implicit, and often really helps, or may even be needed for, interpretation. In the case of the Anti-Joke Chicken meme, for instance, it is difficult to understand the point if the viewer/reader is unaware of the name of the meme, since on top of a picture of a chicken it overlays a "non-joke" (e.g. "A guy walks into a bar, and the bar tender says 'Hey, what can I get for you?'").

Typical image macro memes tend to have a particular division of labour between the top line of text and the bottom line. Those that feature signature phrases, which are highly conventionalized, substantive (i.e. 'fixed') parts of otherwise formal ('open') constructions (in the sense of Fillmore et al. 1988), will typically assign the phrase in particular ways. Thus, for instance, "One does not simply" (in a meme featuring a picture of the character Boromir in the film *The Lord of the Rings*) is top text, "...but that's none of my business" (on top of a tea-drinking Kermit) is bottom text, and the phrase "I don't always [X], but when I do [Y]" splits across top and bottom corresponding to the clause structure. These immediately recognizable visual elements of presentation together form a kind of

¹ For ease of reference, when referring to meme types a shorthand name will be used (of the kind typically used on meme collection sites such as *Knowyourmeme.com*), and the name will be capitalized. Similarly, names of frames will be capitalized.

² I exclude purely visual memes such as the 'pepper spray cop' (see e.g. Huntington 2016) being inserted in various contexts from consideration here, but note that a potentially text-including image-text meme such as the Distracted Boyfriend meme can also be used with visuals only and still retain the properties of the construction (see Section 4).

template (Antonopoulou & Nikiforidou 2011: 2602, 2605) immediately signalling the image macro meme, in a way that is comparable to Cognitive Grammar discussions of highly specific subgenres such as recipes (analysed by Östman 2005) and horoscopes and scholarly comments in text editions (analysed by Antonopoulou & Nikiforidou 2011). Figures 4 and 5 illustrate these formal, template-like features, with the image and fixed phrase calling up the subgenre and readying the reader/viewer for its interpretation.

Figure 4 borrows an image and a line of text from a scene in the film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*, in which the character Boromir discusses the daunting, impossibly difficult task of walking into Mordor (“One does not simply walk into Mordor”), in order to categorize new examples (here, “resisting the cuteness of puppies”) as impossible and doomed to failure (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017: 573-577). The meaning of the construction is not strictly predictable without knowledge of the construction as a whole: “one does not simply” could otherwise also, or perhaps more likely, introduce a kind of reprimand (“one does not simply barge into my office without knocking”), a meaning that is not relevant to the meme. In this sense, the possible interpretations are clearly conventionally constrained (Antonopoulou & Nikiforidou 2011: 2596).

In the meme centring on “the most interesting man in the world” (Figure 5), an image from a series of TV ads for a beer brand is used in combination with a stock phrase schematized from the specific phrase featured as a conclusion to each of these ads (“I don’t always drink beer, but when I do it’s Dos Equis”). The meaning of “I don’t always [X], but when I do [Y]” is again rooted in the original scene (recommendation of an infrequent course of an action) in quite specific ways. An invented example such as “I don’t always go to London for Christmas, but when I do I go by train” can perfectly well be merely descriptive without any invited inference of recommendation, and therefore does not fit the meme particularly well. As with the impossible task in Figure 4, the recommendation in Figure 5 is of course deliberately humorous – an extremely common feature of Internet memes. The creativity of the meme user is called on to come up with surprising and amusing versions, but within a very tightly fixed template, with parts of the construction already filled in or “substantive” (in Fillmore et al.’s [1988] sense).



Figure 4. One Does Not Simply meme.



Figure 5. The Most Interesting Man in the World meme.

Not all image macro memes feature formulaic phrases. One interesting family of memes involves stock characters such as “Good Girl Gina” or “Scumbag Steve” (Figure 6), chosen to stereotype typical (virtuous or inconsiderate) female or male behaviour. In terms of formal, visual features, they present very similar templates to the preceding examples, but linguistically their constructional features are different. As argued in Dancygier & Vandelanotte (2017: 578, 581), they are predictive constructions which share some essential features with *when/then* constructions. For Figure 6, for instance, compare *When his grandpa gets surgery, Scumbag Steve steals his pain meds.* The biclausal structure reflecting both a temporal sequence and a predictive ‘when P, then Q’ connection, the use of habitual present tense, and even the conjunction-less structure are all shared with potential constructional features of existing structures in English (Dancygier 1998, Dancygier & Sweetser 2005: Ch. 9); compare e.g. *miss another deadline, lose the course credit.* What characterizes the textual component of these predictive memes, however, is that the form is further reduced. As in the newspaper headline genre, here articles and determiners tend to be dropped in the interest of brevity. More strikingly perhaps, the subject argument (normally an essential argument to be realized in an English clause) can be dropped, given that it is already visually in focus and hence cognitively accessible to the viewer/reader. A similar argument is made by Ruppenhofer & Michaelis (2010) for a small number of genres (food recipes, the language of product labels, and diaries), where the subject or object can be omitted because it is already being jointly attended to, e.g. ‘[X] attaches to surface’ (product label), ‘[X] went to the cinema’ (diary entry), ‘whisk [X] and add to the mix’ (recipe instruction).



Figure 6. Scumbag Steve meme.

A different subgenre of meme, studied in detail in Lou (2017), is the *When* meme, exemplified in Figure 7, where a *when*-clause is completed visually rather than textually. The effect of a clear presentational template is less strong here, but not completely absent: a top text line starting with *when* is combined with a picture. Often the picture presents an unrelated scene, which the reader/viewer is invited to interpret imaginatively and figuratively in relation to the textual prompt provided in the *when*-clause – an interpretive process captured conceptually as a multimodal simile by Lou (2017). In other cases, like Figure 7, there are more immediate, embodied aspects of the depiction (here, the intense stare of the person in the statue) that, because of our own experience and powers of simulation, we can naturally interpret in relation to the *when*-clause: ‘this is a typical, stressed out response *when the lecturer changes the slide but you’re not done taking notes*’.

When the lecturer changes the slide but
you're not done taking notes



Figure 7. *When* meme.

What we see across these examples is that meme constructions rely on, use and adapt existing constructions, and expand them with visual elements as well. The adaptations to existing constructions are specific to the meme subgenres: for instance, a particular form of reduced predictive construction with an omitted subject argument, as we've seen above, or, in another example not yet discussed, the adaptation of a standard Direct Speech construction (*X, said John*) to a meme construction depicting a person and combining this with a statement followed by the apparent reporting clause "said no one ever" (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2016: 28-34).

This already points to network relations between constructions, for instance between the standard Direct Speech construction and the Said No One Ever meme construction (which reverses the initially communicated viewpoint in its reporting clause); between predictive constructions and predictive meme constructions and *when*-memes; between quotative *be like* constructions and *be like* memes (in which the linguistic *be like* construction is combined with a comically incongruous image, e.g. *Grandparents be like 'one little snack before you go home'* with an image of a toddler munching on an impossibly huge chocolate biscuit); and so on. Each of these relations involves inheritance by the meme construction of properties of the linguistic construction, but also some adaptive specifications unique to the memes. This network of constructions also includes relations among more and less schematic meme constructions: for instance, the more schematic predictive meme construction with male/female stereotype meanings includes Good Girl Gina, Good Guy Grey, Scumbag Stacy and Scumbag Steve (and Neutral Nigel) memes; so-called advice animal memes include e.g. Malicious Advice Mallard and Actual Advice Mallard memes, and so on.

As we have seen so far, elements of both linguistic and visual form (including presentational aspects) are paired with meanings across the different Internet meme constructions, which invite meme users' creativity in producing new variants, within the tightly circumscribed confines of the constructions. The role played by the visual elements clearly varies: some visuals mainly concern the presentational template which marks out the 'subgenre' of meme construction (e.g. "one does not simply", "I don't always [X] but when I do [Y]"), in other meme subgenres the visual is additionally required to fill out elements in the linguistic structure (e.g. the subject in predictive Good/Scumbag Character memes, the concluding 'apodosis' clause in *When* memes). The different role played by visual components of Internet memes has been stressed in previous work (e.g. Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017, Zenner & Geeraerts 2018), where this was mainly seen as a difference in *degree*, with images being nonessential embellishments in some memes (like the Said No One Ever memes discussed by Dancygier & Vandelanotte, or the Linguistic Llama wordplay memes discussed by Zenner & Geeraerts). Here I would suggest that this undersells their value perhaps somewhat,

making them subservient to the linguistic component: only those visuals which “complete” the text are treated as essential in this sense. If we accept the importance of the visuals more fully, we can see that visuals such as the *Lord of the Rings* film still (Figure 4) or the still from the TV commercial (Figure 5) are an integral part, together with the formulaic phrases, of the presentational template characterising the specific meme subgenre. This gives a more positive value to the visual component, rather than treating these types of cases as “lower in degree” of visual input.

The intricate interaction between the visual and linguistic components of Internet meme constructions has earned them the label of ‘multimodal’ (e.g. Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017, Lou 2017, Zenner & Geeraerts 2018, Bülow et al. 2018). This builds on a long tradition of work in the ‘semiotic’ vein of Kress and van Leeuwen (e.g. 2001), focusing on how alongside language visual aspects of presentation also serve to co-create the meanings the writer wants to put across.³ A recent development in this area is that of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (Machin 2013, Hart 2016), exemplified in Hart’s (2017) analysis showing how images in newspaper articles alongside text support the metaphorical understanding of the miners’ strike as a war. In addition to visual elements, studies in this tradition have opened up to other combinations of expressive modalities, such as sound and image (for various examples see e.g. Jewitt 2014, Vandelanotte & Dancygier 2017). While the emerging Construction Grammar-inspired work on memes shares the basic inspiration to include visual components in the analysis, its interest in precisely the *constructional* nature of visuotextual artefacts sets it apart from this broader context.

This section has presented a number of Internet memes, and briefly highlighted the elements which define them as multimodal constructions. These examples have all been well-entrenched memes, which “meme-proficient” communicators will have no problem in recognizing (though relative ‘outsiders’ to the speech community likely will), so we can analyse them with some confidence as constructions. Formally, they are characterized by some form of presentational template, which may be an image combined with a signature phrase (“one does not simply”) or a more abstractly defined type of structure (e.g. *when*-clause, biclausal present tense construction); their meaning is specifically constrained compared to ‘offline’ uses of their linguistic elements; and their use is typically geared towards exchanging viewpoints, usually light-heartedly and humorously, among an online peer group.

By their very nature, Internet memes can be fleeting, emerging very locally as echoic creative responses to the incident or quote of the moment, without going on to any kind of entrenched and schematic form-meaning pairing. These questions are inherently a matter of time scale and entrenchment, and particularly hard to measure. Theoretically, at least, we can hypothesize a continuum from *ad hoc* meme routines, similar to the routines that can develop in the space of a conversation or debate (Brône & Zima 2014; cf. Hoffmann 2017), to entrenched form-meaning pairings with wide circulation and staying power. The example of labelling memes I will focus on in Section 4 will suggest some of this fluidity, with some subgenres (like the Disloyal Boyfriend meme, the Handshake meme or the Butterfly meme) having developed into firmly entrenched constructions, where many others remain essentially one-off wonders. They present an extension of

³ In Cognitive Linguistics especially, the different but related understanding of multimodality ‘in interaction’ is currently a very active focus of research, focusing not on the concurrent use of language and other semiotic modes, but on the concurrent use of language and embodied forms of behaviour (gesture, posture, head tilts, facial expressions and the like) (e.g. Deppermann 2013, Green 2014, Feyaerts et al. 2017). For a critical discussion, see Devylder 2019: 147-149. Given that the two understandings of ‘multimodality’ are related, and similarly recognize the need to study language in the richest possible context of use, I see no fundamental contradiction in using the terms for both ‘types’ of multimodality.

the types of cases presented so far, in not having any fixed textual elements, other than the requirement for there to *be* textual elements meeting the specifications of the construction.

Before turning to these labelling memes, however, an important topic that has remained implicit in the discussion so far needs to be addressed, as it will inform the remainder of this paper: the topic of frames in social media discourse, to which I now turn.

3. Frames in Internet memes

Frames in frame semantics were introduced to refer to “any system of concepts related in such a way that to understand any one of them you have to understand the whole structure in which it fits” (Fillmore 1982: 111; see also e.g. Fillmore 1975, 1985, 2003, Cienki 2007, Boas 2017). In a classic example, by virtue of using the verb *buy* alone, a whole cognitive frame of Commercial Transaction is called up, involving at least a seller, a buyer, a transacted good, and a price.⁴ The notion of frames helps reveal how individual linguistic items provide access to corners of, often fairly detailed, schematic knowledge about how things are and are done in the (extralinguistic) world.

How are frames relevant to an example such as Figure 4 above, “One does not simply... resist the cuteness of puppies”? At one level, lexical frames work like they normally would, with “puppies” in this instance presumably calling up unspoken knowledge about puppies (care-taking for young dogs, feeding and taking responsibility, receiving and giving affection, cute facial expressions, etc.). The more meme-specific point requires us to extend the notion of a (lexical) frame to include visuals: at least for the original group of creators and users of this meme, the image of the character Boromir and the phrase “one does not simply” together evoke the broader scene in the film, in which it is made clear that Mordor is impossibly difficult to get into and cannot simply, leisurely be “walked into” (“One does not simply walk into Mordor”). Thus, the film still and part of the phrase are sufficient to call up a richly detailed sequence of events. This in turn becomes a new framing device, to categorize ever more event types as hopeless, unachievable tasks in the bottom text of the meme, such that the Boromir still and the signature phrase together call up the Impossible Task frame.

The example in Figure 5 above is similar, in the echo of the original phrase from the Dos Equis beer ad and the still from the commercial together calling up, to the meme originators and early adopters, the fuller sequence in which “the most interesting man in the world” recommends a particular beer for those rare occasions when he is minded to drink beer. In the meme this is generalized to a Recommendation frame, applied humorously, given the incongruously pompous self-importance and the typically less than important specific recommendation made.

In both these cases, the Internet meme finds its origin in a highly specific cultural artefact (a film and a commercial), which to the meme originators and original users must have provided all the necessary background to interpret the meme. Many later users presumably have acquired the meme construction without necessarily having seen the film or the commercial, acquiring the meme simply in its Impossible Task or (Humorous) Recommendation senses. This is somewhat similar to the much larger time scale in the history of a language, according to which language users may use a word without knowledge of its original meaning and etymology.

⁴ For ease of exposition, I will implicitly understand “frame” in this section as Fillmore’s “cognitive frame”; the other type he (1982: 117) distinguishes (the interactional frame) will be returned to and applied in Section 5.

Other Internet memes do not find their origin in highly specific, rich contexts, but arise much more randomly. Examples such as Advice Animals or the Anti-Joke Chicken mentioned previously clearly do not involve real-world knowledge of animals giving out good or bad advice, or making anticlimactic non-jokes. Even here, though, the presentational template of the meme itself does provide (proficient) meme consumers with the necessary knowledge to relate the meme's content to its relevant interpretive background frame (e.g. good/bad advice, non-joke). Examples involving stock characters such as Good Girl Gina or, in Figure 6 above, Scumbag Steve, are similar. The images used in these Internet memes were initially randomly hit upon, used in a meme which took off, became popular and spread. There is thus no pre-meme fame and cultural knowledge relating to the people pictured in them, and to argue that the pictures inherently depict 'good' or 'inconsiderate' people would be strained (at best, it can be said that 'Good Girl Gina' is smiling, and 'Scumbag Steve' looks rosy-cheeked and possibly a bit nonplussed). As the patterns, and their associated names, became established, however, the memes themselves have become framing devices, instantly calling up the associated frames of Helpful Behaviour or Inconsiderate Behaviour (involving a person performing an act or displaying some behaviour, which is beneficial or detrimental to another person). A good example of this was discussed in Dancygier & Vandelanotte (2017: 585-586), where the exact same text, "sees that you're drunk / takes your keys" is used in both a Good Guy Greg and a Scumbag Steve meme. Meme users instantly call up their frame knowledge to interpret these two memes: when a helpful person (Good Guy Greg) sees that you're drunk, they will make sure you don't get into a road accident but offer to drive you home (for instance); when an inconsiderate person (Scumbag Steve) sees that you're drunk, on the other hand, they will take advantage of the situation and take your car for a joy ride (for instance).

A further illustration of the degree to which these initially random, ad hoc pictures have become powerful framing devices through their use in a productive Internet meme is the independent development of one visual element of the Scumbag Steve meme: the hat. The hat, which happened to be worn by the person whose picture came to represent the character of Scumbag Steve, indeed features in a series of memes on its own, where it turns anyone into a bad or useless character. Thus, for instance, we get a painting of King Henry VIII with the text "church wants to uphold his morals / starts a new church". Figure 8 shows an example where the hat is even added to an inanimate object – a ceiling fan – thereby immediately signalling that something is bad about the situation (as specified in the text: the fan's settings are either too weak or too strong).



Figure 8. Scumbag Hat meme.

What this discussion reveals can be summed up as follows. Some Internet memes originate in a visual element (image) which, together with a textual element (a stock phrase), calls up detailed knowledge about an existing cultural artefact. From there they develop into framing devices which can be used and interpreted even by communicators not familiar with the original, detailed script,

prompting recall of, for instance in our examples above, the Impossible Task or (Humorous) Recommendation frames. Memes whose visual elements were selected in a more ad hoc and random way lack the initial step, but they too come to represent frames, such as Helpful Behaviour or Inconsiderate Behaviour. Whereas the meme origin (in the first of these two scenarios) may lie in an elaborate frame, the resulting framing to which the memes are put is not highly elaborate, but does evoke essential unspoken knowledge that is “tightly linked” (Dancygier & Sweetser 2014: 18) to the visual and textual elements presented explicitly in the meme. The pre-existing cultural frame in which some memes originate, and which is highly detailed, is thus essentially optional; the frame constituting a central meaning-making mechanism of the meme (even where no pre-existing frame is relied on) tends to be more general and more skeletal (compare e.g. Walking into Mordor to Impossible Task).

The next section turns to a type of memes – so-called labelling memes – that provides an interesting testing ground for notions of constructs vs. constructions, and framing.

4. Labelling memes, and the case of the disloyal boyfriend

Labelling (or ‘object-labelling’) memes⁵ involve words being superimposed onto (holistic) pictured scenes as instructional ‘labels’ to guide the intended figurative reading. This makes them cases of multimodal simile, as Lou (2017) first proposed for *when*-memes, more than multimodal metaphor (as defined in the work of Forceville, e.g. 2008):⁶ there is no blending of source and target, and the mappings required are carefully guided (by means of the textual cues), rather than potentially open-ended, relating two whole domains of experience (as in examples like the TIME IS SPACE or LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor) (for discussion see e.g. Croft & Cruse 2004: 211-216, Dancygier & Sweetser 2014: 137-148, Harding 2017). As an initial example, consider Figure 9.

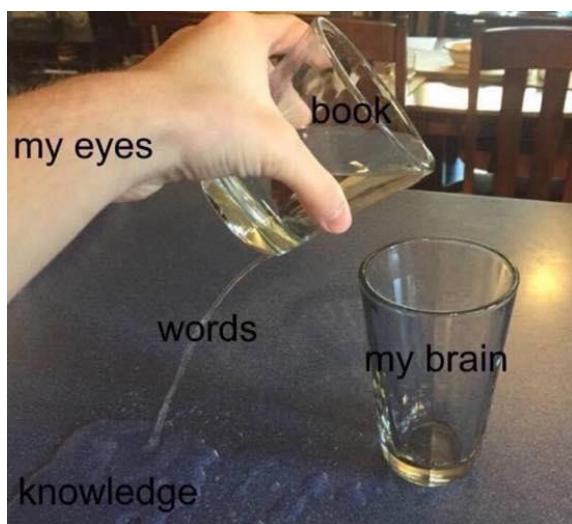


Figure 9. Labelling meme: complex example.

⁵ Vandelanotte (2018) tentatively used the term ‘labelling meme’; the meme description website [Knowyourmeme.com](http://knowyourmeme.com), in a contribution likewise dating back to 2018, uses the term ‘object labelling meme’ or ‘label meme’ (see <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/object-labeling>). Given that not only ‘objects’ are labelled in them, the more general term is perhaps preferable.

⁶ Note that Forceville (2008: 466-467) does briefly describe the case of pictorial simile (i.e. visual, but not in combination with text, so ‘monomodal’ in his approach); his main focus is on multimodal metaphor.

Here, the situation of trying to pour liquid from one recipient into another, and failing, with most liquid being spilled onto the table, has superimposed to it various components of a different situation, which we are now invited to consider as similar to it, namely the difficulty of getting knowledge accessed by reading a book into one's memory (or brain). This is not generally linking the domains of glass recipients and liquids to the domains of books, brains and knowledge, but suggesting, in an imaginative and humorous way, that the analysis of the pouring event into several components can be applied to the components making up lack of success in learning through reading. There is once more a basic incongruity here, widely recognized in humour studies more generally (e.g. Attardo 1994, Brône 2008, Antonopoulou & Nikiforidou 2009). However, unlike in typical humorous contexts, or in frame-shifting more generally (Coulson 2001), the way in which this incongruity is resolved in labelling memes is not that of a sudden reveal requiring re-interpretation of an initial understanding. Instead, the process is more like an almost didactic, stepwise, methodical insistence on the elements of correspondence between the source and target.

A labelling meme such as that in Figure 9 is one of many highly idiosyncratic, often complex examples, which can remain essentially one-off creative constructs, rather than develop into any kind of entrenched constructions. They are still part of the more schematic meme subgenre of labelling memes, and the basic presentational aspect of labels on top of parts of a complex image still has the same kind of presentational, genre-identifying function we described for earlier examples. But in a case like Figure 9, it seems implausible to claim that the complex image constitutes a frame – indeed, all the elements we need to ‘parse’ the event are contained within the image already, with no need to access further, unspoken knowledge. Likewise, the construct has not become a framing device itself, used to recategorize experience after experience in terms of the liquid pouring event. Part of the reason for this must surely be the high level of complexity, with five components being labelled. I would consider Figure 9 a construct instantiating the higher-level labelling meme construction – but not itself a construction.

The situation is different with a number of labelling memes which did catch on, and which tend to have only two or three components of the image being labelled. A simple example is the Trumpet Boy meme in Figure 10, showing a boy playing the trumpet at a girl who covers her ears to block out the noise, used here to suggest someone shutting out society’s influence to protect their sanity. Like Figure 9, the depicted event is inherently comical and quirky and therefore attractive, but unlike Figure 9, here the image is not overcrowded and complex, which likely helps explain the success of this meme as a full-blown construction, not just a one-off labelling meme construct. Again it seems that the image itself is self-contained enough not to require access to much in the way of broader, unspoken frame knowledge, but in this case, the meme has itself becoming a popular framing device, instantly signalling by means of its presentational template that something will be communicated humorously about an unwanted message the meme creator prefers to have blocked out.



Figure 10. Trumpet Boy.

While labelling meme constructions such as Trumpet Boy are multimodal in combining text and image, the textual component is much less fixed compared to the cases discussed previously. There, there were fixed formulaic phrases, or a fixed word part of a fixed clause type (*when*), or at least a more abstract linguistic requirement (biclausal, present tense, etc. in the case of predictive memes). Here, the linguistic component of the meme is only minimally constrained: in the typical case,⁷ a number of noun phrases (two in the Trumpet Boy meme, three in the Distracted Boyfriend meme we will come to below) labelling the (con)structional ‘slots’ in the visual component. Some examples, as we will also see below, may even use images again as labels, instead of textual phrases.

Another point of comparison concerns the origin of the image used in the meme. Examples such as Figures 9-10 above are like the stock characters (e.g. Scumbag Steve) or advice animals (e.g. Malicious Advice Mallard) mentioned previously, in being ad hoc and random, rather than rooted in a pre-existing, culturally rich frame. Another labelling meme which, like Trumpet Boy but unlike Figure 9, has spread widely is the Butterfly meme, exemplified in Figure 11. This is more like the One Does Not Simply or The Most Interesting Man in the World memes, in originating in a highly culturally specific artefact. The image used is adapted from an anime featuring an android who is not entirely successfully programmed, and so gets names for things wrong; in the original, the android points to a butterfly and asks “Is this a pigeon?”.⁸ This frame of an android mis-naming things has come to be used to pillory wrong assumptions or lazy understandings of some issue, as in Figure 11, in which “strangers on the internet” are mistaking “liking my tweets about how sad I am” for friendship.



Figure 11. Butterfly meme.

Perhaps the best-known labelling meme (at the time of writing) is the Distracted (or Disloyal) Boyfriend meme, which is worth considering a little more closely to illustrate the potential for further extensions once a labelling meme construction is firmly established. The meme uses a stock image of a hand-holding couple walking in the street, with the young man of the couple looking back over his shoulder, casting an admiring glance towards another girl passing in the opposite direction from the couple, while his girlfriend looks on in annoyed disapproval. The embodied aspects of the image (posture, hand-holding, facial expressions), combined with cultural knowledge about heterosexual relationships, make the image instantly ‘readable’, although presumably at least more frame knowledge is still evoked compared to our initial labelling meme example (pouring water/knowledge but not hitting the recipient/brain). Elements of a Romantic Rivalry frame such as

⁷ An occasional example may be found that deviates by labelling at a level below the word: one version of the Distracted Boyfriend meme places “PRO” in the middle as the boyfriend neglecting “(PRO)DUCTIVITY” as girlfriend in favour of “(PRO)CRASTINATE” as passing girl.

⁸ See <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/is-this-a-pigeon> for further particulars.

boyfriend / girlfriend, faithfulness and trust expectations in a relationship, possible love rivals, etc. are not as inherent in the image as the glass-pouring and target-missing are in Figure 9 above.



Figure 12. Distracted Boyfriend meme.

As noted above, the permanent meme structure contains no specific text, but centers on the three positions and their associated semantic roles, which get labelled for them to be applied to a different domain – in Figure 12, Herman Melville’s novel *Moby Dick*, which at times devotes more attention to whale facts than to plot. The initial Romantic Rivalry frame thus becomes entrenched, in the meme, as a more general frame of preference, or Attention Shift: Boyfriend shifts attention from (or: momentarily prefers) Girlfriend to Other Girl. In this way, meme consumers will immediately associate a new iteration of this meme with a pivot away from an earlier focus of attention to a new one, now considered more attractive or important. The image is the conceptual core of the construction, defining the three semantic roles, in a way that can be compared to the way the lexical verb in a clause constitutes its nucleus, and defines the main participants in the event (e.g. X prefer Y to Z, with the Boyfriend/Conceptualizer as X, the Other Girl/New Focus as Y, and the Girlfriend/Initial Focus as Z).

While there are countless examples of this meme in the form represented in Figure 12, it is worth pointing out a number of interesting creative extensions from this prototype. One is the case where the labels are visual, rather than textual. Sometimes this visual labelling is used to reflect a shift in meme communication itself: for instance, the Boyfriend/Conceptualizer might be Twitter, represented by Twitter’s bird logo, and the Girlfriend/Initial Focus and Other Girl/New Focus might be ‘yesterday’s’ meme and a new, now more popular meme. A more extensive example of visual labelling is that in Figure 13, which to an extent re-literalizes the constructional Attention Shift meaning of the meme back closer to the original Romantic Rivalry frame, in applying it to the successive marriages of King Henry VIII. While these visual labelling meme examples may seem to stray a while off from what is usually understood by constructions in linguistics, they are still form-meaning pairings used in exchanging viewpoints between people.

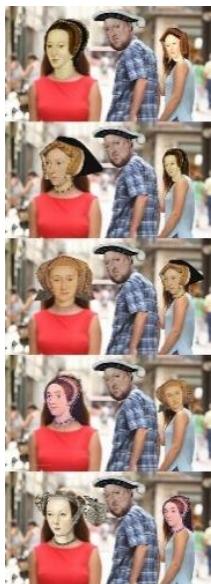


Figure 13. Distracted Boyfriend meme: visual labelling.

A different kind of extension from the prototype concerns the image itself. Both minor (Figure 14) and rather major (Figure 15) deviations occur in which the image is changed, but maintains the three central positions showing an attention shift on the part of the figure depicted in the centre of the scene, from one person to another. Figure 14 is a minor, very clever deviation, rendering a highly schematic version of the three figures in Excel bar charts, and replacing the labelling on the figures themselves with labelling in a separate legend accompanying the chart.

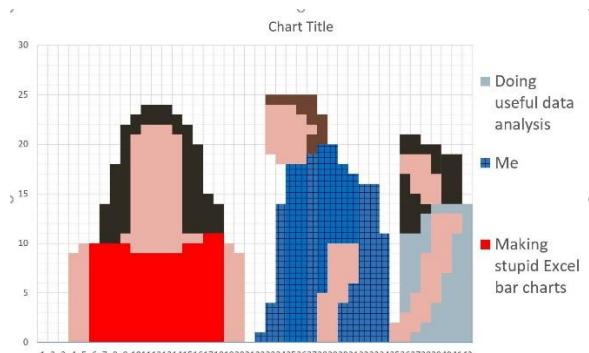


Figure 14. Distracted Boyfriend meme: bar chart version.⁹

Continuing the comparison with the verb as conceptual core of a clausal construction, and the image as the conceptual core of this meme construction, we might liken variations like this to the use of less typical verbs in a construction. When less typical verbs are used in argument structure constructions (Goldberg 1995), some form of accommodation needs to be able to occur for the constructional meaning and the verbal meaning to cohere (Langacker 2005). In the Caused Motion construction, for instance, we might consider a verb like *wave*, not itself normally seen as causing

⁹ Many memes are part of online culture, in which meme artefacts flow freely and often cannot (or not reliably) be tied to a specific producer. The examples used in this paper can usually be found on existing meme collecting sites, such as Knowyourmeme.com. This specific instance, though, is the work of the Twitter account @_daviant, from where the meme was tweeted out on 22 April 2020 [https://twitter.com/_daviant/status/1253039113151938562], prompting among others a response from Microsoft.

motion, instead of a verb like *push* in an example like *I waved the sheet of paper off the table*. The accommodation required is slight, because a sheet of paper does not weigh a lot so can be brought into motion simply by the displacement of some air, a side-effect of waving. The accommodation needed may be larger, but essentially similar, in an oft-analysed example such as *Sam sneezed the napkin off the table*, where sneezing is accompanied by forceful expulsion of air, which can be brought into correspondence with relevant sections of the meaning of causing motion where a light object is concerned.

The correspondence between the bar chart version and the original Distracted Boyfriend image is quite easy to see; in a case like Figure 15 the distance between the two versions is larger and some greater conceptual work is needed, abstracting away from the boyfriend visual to this different type of social event scene with different participants. Sufficient similarities remain, in terms of posture, direction of gaze, and number of participants for this image to be brought into correspondence with the original, just as enough correspondences could be found between *sneeze* and a more prototypical verb like *push* in the caused motion example above.



Figure 15. Distracted Boyfriend meme: changed image.

In Figure 15, the then Prime Minister Theresa May replaces the Boyfriend/Conceptualizer, her husband Philip May replaces the Girlfriend/Initial Focus, and the young man the Other Girl/New Focus. The curious twist is that the labelling imparts to Theresa May the role of Eurosceptic Labour MPs (whereas she was at the time Leader of the Conservative Party), and the two men vying for her attention are two different versions ('a few months ago' vs. 'now') of her proposed Brexit deal with the EU. The mismatch in the central role conflation (Theresa May/Labour MPs) adds greatly to the humorous effect of this particular meme. Many more extensions can be found which use different three-person constellations, often for 'metamemes' reflecting on the nature of memes themselves: for instance, an old black-and-white picture where the two competing foci of attention are 'the look back meme' (Old Focus) and 'the original look back meme' (New Focus), or a scene from Star Trek where they are 'a popular meme' (Old Focus) and 'a Star Trek version of that meme' (New Focus).

As this discussion has shown, labelling memes can develop from creative constructs into constructions, provided they do not contain too many labelled elements. While the label is usually textual, it can occasionally be visual too; and for an extremely well-entrenched example such as the Disloyal Boyfriend, the picture at the heart of the meme construction can be replaced, in creative variations, by other pictures sharing sufficient features with the original.

While this section has focused on memes as single digital objects, specifically as image files, it is worth pointing out that other variations exist across media types and media platforms, including

brief (labelled) video clips, including TikTok videos. Twitter, with its in-built option of using a basic set of emoji, occasionally has its own version of an existing labelling meme; this is the case of the Handshake meme (in which a handshake reveals an unexpected feature shared by the two hands/arms involved in the handshake). More interestingly, some memes seem to have originated on Twitter and remain specific to it; an example is given in Figure 16. This Pushpin or Detour meme is represented by a combination of pushpins and lines, which calls up the frame of Maps (locations, routes, etc.), and it has a kind of three-place structure not too different from the Distracted Boyfriend meme. In terms of its interpretation, the people identified at the first pushpin (here, girls) do not take the predictable, obvious route to the logical destination (here, actual self care), but instead make a bizarre detour to an altogether less valid or sane destination (here, a facemask). A paraphrase with *prefer* is again possible ('girls prefer a facemask to actual self care'). Even though visually, given that only characters and emoji are used, this looks quite different from all the examples discussed in this section so far, in essential respects I would argue this is a labelling meme too, but of a more schematic, less visually rich kind. It is highly formulaic, and very easy to reproduce without recourse to a meme generator site, let alone image editing software.



Figure 16. Pushpin (detour) Twitter meme.

The next section stays on the topic of Twitter, but turns to a different kind of framing, related to Fillmore's (1982: 117) notion of interactional frames.

5. The Conversation frame in Twitter discourse

There is a different kind of framing from that which we associate with lexical items (or, as we have seen, some images), evoking a structured chunk of 'encyclopedic' knowledge about how people and things fit into events. This other type of framing pertains to "the actual communicative situation", i.e. "how we conceptualize what is going on between the speaker and hearer, or between the author and the reader" (Fillmore 1982: 117). Genre knowledge illustrates this notion of what Fillmore calls interactional frames: knowledge that you are dealing with memes, and indeed knowledge that you are dealing with specific subgenres (Advice Animals, Scumbag Steve memes, One Does Not Simply memes, etc.), immediately prompts expectations about the types of meanings and the tone of the communication (typically, humorous).

The notion of interactional frames has been used productively in descriptions of constructions, both at broader-ranging levels such as "conversation" or "private conversation" (e.g. Fried 2009, 2010; Antonopoulou & Nikiforidou 2011), and at more specific levels (e.g. "interaction among friends" or "service encounter" as types of frames relevant to telephone-call opening constructions, Antonopoulou & Nikiforidou 2011: 2597-2598). The very pervasive frame I briefly discuss in this

section, the Conversation frame, is in itself very broad, though its presentation in Twitter discourse takes on a very regular, conventionalized format, as discussed below.

Pascual (2004) has investigated the ways in which the structure of conversation is reflected in language structure and use, specifically in the functioning of fictive interaction (the use of, e.g., quotation to not in fact quote anyone, but, e.g., express beliefs, as can be argued to apply to the Said No One Ever ever meme referred to previously). She uses the term “conversation frame” for this, which I adopt here.¹⁰ A conversation is a type of interaction which we have plentiful experience of, and a lot of explicit, unspoken knowledge about. For instance, we know about turn-taking, taking and yielding the floor, and a host of conversational principles (the basic assumption of communicative cooperation, of our interlocutors believing what they say to be true, etc.; cf. Grice 1989). Face-to-face conversations represented in print follow certain presentational conventions, depending on media platform and stylistic preferences. Question and answer sequences in print media interviews are an influential model, and may use bold type to distinguish questions from answers, and use names followed by colons to succinctly identify speakers. The latter convention forms the basis for the particular presentational template that is ubiquitous in Twitter discourse.

What makes the Twitter pattern more than just a continuation of a genre convention from a different media platform is its specialized conventionalized meaning, which is to highlight and criticize behaviours. One particularly formulaic and entrenched variant involves inconsistencies in people’s views and attitudes – including (typically more comically) one’s own; this is formally marked by the addition of the word “also” in the basic template “X: [quote] / Also X: [quote]”. Figure 17 shows a monomodal (textual only) example involving (serious) criticism of a politician’s changing views depending on the circumstances.¹¹

James Cleverly: "People would have voted differently if we had known the facts". Also James Cleverly: "There shouldn't be another EU Referendum even though people didn't know all the facts".

5:43 PM · Mar 18, 2019 · Mobile Web (M2)

Figure 17. “X / Also X” meme.

While not multimodal, the specific “X / Also X” form used does seem specific to the Internet construction, and so qualifies, in my view, as an Internet meme (cf. Section 1); indeed, this is not the sort of structure that one would expect to show up in typical face-to-face conversation. Figure 18, on the other hand, is a multimodal (text-and-image) example, more humorously indicating lack of inconsistency in oneself. It also shows that what follows the colon need not be a quotation (whether actual or fictive), but can be an image that imitates a kind of behaviour. Here specifically, the image requires access to some specific frame knowledge: the man depicted is Simon Cowell, well-known in the UK and the US as a talent competition judge. This knowledge allows the example to be interpreted in terms of an inconsistency between non-judgemental and judgemental behaviour. The extension from quotation to some form of imitation is not unexpected, given the deep links between the two (see e.g. Clark & Gerrig 1990, Vandelanotte & Davidse 2009, Clark 2016).

¹⁰ Pascual’s use of the term is only linked to Fillmore’s general framing concept at one point, in a footnote (2004: 2), without reference to the distinction between cognitive and interactional frames.

¹¹ Tweets from relatively small accounts run by people who are not public figures are anonymized, but full source information is available on request. The tweet in Figure 19 is not anonymised as it was sent from an account run by a trade specialist and visiting professor with a large (c. 60,000 people) following, quote-tweeting a similarly large (c. 60,000 people) account run by a pro-Brexit political commentator.

me: who am I to judge?

also me:

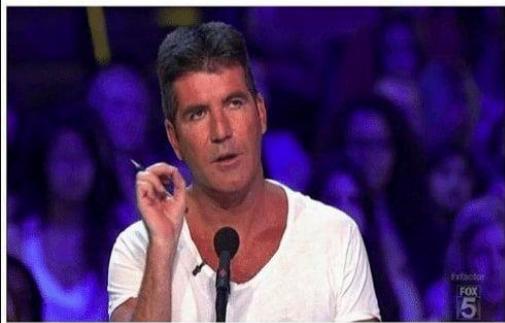


Figure 18. "Me / Also Me" meme.

As idiomatic constructions, the "X / Also X" and "Me / Also me" constructions are both at the formal end of the formal – substantive (lexically specified) end of the spectrum (Fillmore et al. 1988). They are also clearly closely linked, in a network view of constructions. The first person form is a special case of the more general pattern, with a special pragmatic point, namely self-criticism or, perhaps more accurately given the humorous overtones in these cases, self-mockery. The non-first person uses tend to have more bite as forms of critique, as in the political example in Figure 17.

Other cases of phrases identifying a person or group of people, followed by a colon, to introduce some (often fictive) quote or imitation are further close relatives within this network. There is broad variety of these with many subtle differences (see Vandelanotte 2020 for discussion), but one example can here represent this wider panoply of options. Figure 19 is quite a complex tweet: it uses the platform-specific function of quote-tweeting, i.e. quoting a prior tweet by someone else (here, political commentator Patrick O'Flynn), with the option of commenting on it in the space opened up above the quoted tweet. That space is often used for very short comments, or for visuals (still images, or moving GIF animations), showing the quoting person's response to the quoted tweet. Essentially, this space provides a built-in slot for the quoting person's expression of stance, specifically for the "stance follow" produced in response to the "stance lead" taken in the quoted tweet, to borrow Du Bois' (2007) terminology.

In Figure 19, the stance follow is monomodal – only textually expressed – but decidedly complex. A trade specialist and Brexit commentator quote-tweets an anecdote, obviously fictitious, related by a former Member of the European Parliament for the UK Independence Party, in which a four-year-old supposedly made a ringing pro-Brexit statement. In the stance follow (= the quote-tweet comment), the ridiculousness and unseriousness of the obviously invented anecdote is expressed very indirectly, by contrasting the attitudes of Conservatives, responding very negatively to any concerns voiced by climate activist Greta Thunberg, but unquestioningly accepting and agreeing with the imaginary four-year-old (as appeared from approving tweeted responses to and endorsements of the embedded tweet in Figure 19). What this complex example shares with more basic and formulaic examples like Figure 17 is not just the presentational template of "name:" structures and the reliance on the conversation frame to typify and contrast attitudes. In fact, in the juxtaposition of two fictive exchanges (Greta Thunberg-Conservatives, and Imaginary 4-year old-Conservatives), there is a different, implicit way of evoking the inconsistency frame associated with "X / Also X" constructions. The example seems too elaborate and idiosyncratic to give rise to a new construction in its complex particulars, but as a creative construct it does share features with the prototype construction it deviates from.



Dmitry Grozoubinski
@DmitryOpines

Greta Thunberg: "Planet's on fire, here's the science."

Conservatives: "Brainwashed pawn!"

Imaginary 4-year old: "Don't cancel the Brexit vote I was 17 years away from casting!"

Conservatives: "What a hilarious and bold free thinker precociously grasping the issues."



Patrick O'Flynn @oflynnsocial · 24 Oct

On a train pulling into Doncaster. A 4-yr-old just got up and said: "This is Yorkshire and if any of you are southern snobs who believe in cancelling our Brexit votes then don't bother getting off here." The whole carriage stood up and applauded!

9:10 am · 25 Oct 2019 from Genève, Suisse · Twitter for Android

Figure 19. Creative quote-tweet construct relying on the Conversation frame.

6. Conclusions

This paper has focused on two main modes of Internet discourse – Internet memes (mainly various types of image macro memes and labelling memes) and Twitter discourse. Expanding on recent Construction Grammar accounts, the point was made that various prominent subgenres of image macro memes in particular are characterized by presentational templates combining an image with a fixed, formulaic phrase in some cases, but also with more abstract elements of structure such as *when*-clauses or reduced biclausal predictive structures. Some of these meme constructions license genre-specific features, such as subject suppression (where the image can fill in the subject role) or headline-like syntax. The presentational template of labelling memes is more schematic, without fixed linguistic elements, but with the requirement for aspects of the meme's image to be labelled in a way that guides the interpretation. In the case of the Distracted Boyfriend meme, extensions from the prototype were found which use variations on the visual template, namely images involving different people, but in similar constellations with similar embodied aspects of posture and gaze. The X / Also X meme in Twitter discourse uses a basic phrasal template (including a detail of punctuation, the colon) in different mono- or multimodal combinations and extensions.

Some (potential) memes remain at the level of a creative construct, without breaking through to the level of an entrenched and more widely used construction with at least some staying power. While (lack of) communicative need may be a factor, it seems complexity is another: some of the Brexit bus artefacts discussed in the first section, and some of the labelling memes with over-many labels, require too much effort to produce and process compared to relatively simple, and more easily reproducible, cases. Nevertheless, a complex labelling construct, for instance, does share its basic meaning-making mechanism (as a kind of multimodal simile) with the broader labelling meme construction.

Frames were argued to play a central role in the meaning of the different Internet memes and Twitter patterns studied. In the case of Internet memes, these were cognitive frames, similar to those applying to lexical concepts like *buy* (evoking the Commercial Transaction frame). Some image macro and labelling memes originate in a highly culturally specific and richly detailed frame (e.g. the One Does Not Simply and Butterfly memes), even though for many current users the link with that

origin may be weak or even lost. Even for them, however, the meme has come to evoke a different, more general and skeletal, frame, as in the shift from the Walking into Mordor to the Impossible Task frame in the case of the One Does Not Simply meme. It seems that highly complex and idiosyncratic labelling constructs, depicting complex events and employing many labels, can be self-contained and not evoke further unspoken frame elements, while entrenched labelling constructions do. Twitter discourse also shows the occasional labelling meme, such as the Pushpin meme, but also shows constructions relying on the broad Conversation frame, such as the X / Also X meme.

Creativity and humour are at the heart of the much creative Internet communication, though that does not prevent some uses from taking on more serious overtones: the X / Also X construction in particular (when it is not in the first person) tends to be used in more serious contexts of political critique.

The questions of form, meaning and use of different subgenres of social media discourse addressed in this paper took a broad view, taking in many examples, with no claim to exhaustivity, but attempting some breadth of coverage nonetheless. Detailed case studies tracking a single meme family across time, and modelling its form and meaning, would be very useful in beginning to expand our constructicon into (for want of a better word) an ever evolving ‘memicon’.

Acknowledgements

Parts of the ideas presented here benefitted from discussions held at the “Perspectives for 21st century viewpoint research” (Universiteit Leiden, 22-23 November 2016), the 11th AELCO (Spanish Cognitive Linguistics Association) conference (University of Córdoba, 17-19 October 2018), the 8th “CogLing Days” (UC Louvain, 13-14 December 2018) and the “Reviewing viewpoint” workshop (Université de Namur, 19-20 September 2019). Particular thanks for comments and suggestions at these events are due to (in alphabetical order) Geert Brône, Bert Cappelle, Barbara Dancygier, Mirjam Fried, Pedro Gras, Arie Verhagen, and Eline Zenner. Many thanks also to Renata Enghels and María Sol Sansiñena for including me in their workshop at the 8th Cogling Days, and for their patience, which I’m afraid, in the anxious pandemic times we’ve been living through, I have tried rather hard – sorry!

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